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Radiated Food and Risk Communication in Post-Fukushima Japan

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On the morning of 11 March 2011, a combination of earthquake, tsunami and the meltdown of three reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant hit the Northeast of Japan. As radiation from the nuclear disaster hit food production nationwide, levels of public anxiety and concern mounted. Information on the scale and the extent of the radioactive contamination was scarce and often contradicting, while food contamination stories popped up one after another, triggering mass consumer avoidance. In the face of this unprecedented food crisis, ensuring 'safe food' became urgent priority for the Japanese government.

The Japanese government's responses to the radiation risk after the Triple Disaster sparked much academic debate and criticism, specifically from a consumer/citizen angle. Governmental risk communication was criticized for a strong simplification of the information, the levelling out of scientific uncertainty, the normalisation of the radiation risk, and its corrective aim in a one-way, top-down structure. Moreover, its focus on assuring the safety of the Japanese food supply and promoting domestic food consumption did not suffice in assisting Japanese consumers in dealing with daily food safety worries. To the contrary, this might even have jeopardized the health of Japanese consumers (Kanda et al., 2015; Kimura, 2016, 2017; Takeda, 2017; Reiher, 2017). Studies on post-Fukushima risk communication in general have identified several consumer expectations towards the government: more transparency, a tightening of the gap between experts and the general public, and a more citizen-centered approach (Figueroa, 2013; Perko, 2016; Kimura, 2017; 2016; 2015; Reiher, 2017; Takeda, 2017; Yamaguchi, 2016; Sternsdorff-Cisterna, 2015).

These findings are in line with the theoretical debate on risk communication, food and trust. Until the end of the 1990s, the conventional approach to risk communication was based on the information deficit model. Simply put, the public's lack of knowledge and technical understanding was the problem, and this was solved by top-down information provision. Experts selected the information and assessment deemed necessary, leaving no room for the opinions and perceptions of the lay public in this model, despite the differing risk assessments on both sides (Slovic, 1987). As such, the model lent itself to the authorities' attenuating or amplifying risks by the mere selection of risks or expert opinions to convey (Renn, 2014, p.1277). This model has shown to be ineffective, and risk communication, like other forms of strategic communication, is now understood to be more effective if conceived of as an interactive, dialogic process (Siegrist, Cvetkovich & Roth, 2000). Through dialogue, institutions should aim to understand the perceptions and concerns of the public, and adjust their risk management strategies based on this knowledge, in order to restore public confidence and trust (UNFAO, 2003; 2016; Löfstedt, 2005). Rather than mere dissemination of information or normative persuasion, the goal of risk communication is thus a two-way process of social learning, aimed at helping people make informed decisions (Renn, 2014, p. 1278; Siegrist, 2014, p. 1241; Arvai, 2014).

Although not without challenges and problems of its own, this form of risk communication, including the principles of participation, transparency and communicated scientific uncertainty, has thus become the standard (FAO 2016, EFSA 2017), to the extent that the Japanese government officially signed up in 2004 (Food Safety Commission, 2004; 2015). However, as this presentation argues, the ostensible use of participatory and transparent risk communication is often mere window-dressing, giving the impression of an open dialogue while framing public fears as irrational, or simply wrong.

Drawing on theories and principles of risk communication, this presentation analyses how the Japanese government sought to restore the notion of 'safe food' in the uncertain aftermath of the Fukushima disaster. For this purpose, it applies a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000; Kohlbacher, 2005) on representative governmental material for three selected case studies of risk communication spanning different stages after the disaster (2011-2019); firstly the setting of both provisional and adjusted radiation standards, secondly the so-called 'Risk Communicators Programme' and thirdly the efforts of the '*Fūhyō Higai* [harmful rumours] Taskforce'.

Conflicting Radiation Standards

Reports of food contamination emerged within a week of the onset of the Fukushima disaster. As public anxiety did not subside despite governmental reassurances, the need to establish and communicate limits for what defined 'safe food' became apparent. On March 17, 2011, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) issued Provisional Regulatory Values (PRVs). Given the general scientific uncertainty on the subject and the urgency of the matter, the Food Safety Commission did not endorse the scientific appropriateness of the PRVs (FSC, 2011). However, high level governmental representatives kept reassuring the public and advocating for solidarity with the

affected farmers in the Northeast of Japan by not avoiding their produce. At the same time, local and national politicians' actions and comments further amplified confusion. Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintarō for example appeared on television drinking tap water, the day after bottled water was being distributed to residents because of the restriction on tap water consumption (ABC News, 2011). Despite this official reassurance, consumer organizations and experts immediately voiced their skepticism and criticism towards the legitimacy, methodology and the actual implementation of the government-set provisional standards. Anxiety among the public regarding the food safety situation was high and causally related to the PRVs and their doubtful basis.

In order to address this problem of trust, the Japanese government announced new -clearly stricter- standards. However, despite their announcement in October 2011, the new standards would only be effective as of April 2012 – more than six months later. The poor communication and the delayed introduction of these tighter standards left the public wondering about the food that they were and had been eating so far (Sternsdorff-Cisterna, 2013, Kimura, 2016). How could food in October 2011 be guaranteed as absolutely safe [*anzen*], if in April 2012 it would no longer be?

Although surely placed in a difficult situation, the initial response to the radioactive contamination of food by the Japanese authorities was thus not able to do the basics: provide the consumer with consistent and simple information on how to manage the food risk in their daily life. Instead, the response was reactive, inconsistent, and confusing, sowing distrust and uncertainty among the public and other stakeholders. The later risk communication focuses precisely on this public uncertainty – rather than on contaminated food – as harmful and dangerous to Japanese food consumers and producers, without acknowledging the role of the earlier contradictory risk communication in creating the uncertainty in the first place.

Risk Communicators and 'Correct Information'

As one response to calls for improved risk communication, specifically regarding food, the government initiated a program in September 2013 aimed at training citizens as certified Radiation Risk Communicators (RRC, *Shokuhinchū no hōshaseibusshitsu ni kansuru komyunikētā* [Communicators on Radioactive Substances in Food] (Kimura, 2016, pp. 58-59). The idea was to educate a group of citizens in food and radiation, and they would then spread 'correct information' (*seikakuna jōhō*) about the national food safety situation and teach their fellow consumers how to manage food risk by themselves (CAA, 2013).

At first glance, the RRC program appears to embrace and encapsulate modern, participative risk communication: the program actively engages in a dialogue with consumers, and even uses these consumers as a medium of risk communication to inform the wider public about food risks. However, a closer look at the material used in the sessions clearly shows the intention of the program to 'correct' the public's 'misunderstanding' against the backdrop of the 'harmful rumours'-discourse or *fūhyō higai* – referring to the economic impact of rumours harming the reputation of Japan's rural and industrial economies. The government's role in creating this doubt in the first place is conspicuous by its mere absence in the material.

A focus on 'correct information' reduces the ambiguous problem to a reassuringly simple issue, hinting at the knowledge deficit model of risk communication that presumes the consumer as unknowledgeable in terms of scientific matters. The danger is thus not radiation, which is clearly under control according to the government. Rather, the public's uncertainty and lack of correct knowledge is the real risk in terms of food safety. The solution logically lies in educating and informing the public and correcting their understanding and behaviour, a responsibility which now rests in the hands of the participants of the course. At its heart, the RRC program was thus really about preventing the so-called 'harmful rumours' (*fūhyō higai*) rather than engaging in meaningful state-public dialogue about radiation risks. As such, both risk communication and risk management go hand in hand here: the radiation risk is managed by communicating the 'correct information'.

The Fūhyō Higai Taskforce battling harmful rumours

From the earliest responses on, the government's priority was thus on preventing damage by so-called rumours, and this anti-rumour strategy was quickly integrated into their risk communication efforts. With the establishment of the *Fūhyō Higai* Taskforce [*Genshiryoku Saigai Fūhyō Higai Eikyō Taisaku Task Force*] in 2013, the communication effort to counter the risk of widespread rumours was put to the next gear. The 'Taskforce to Respond to Effects of Harmful Rumours related to the Nuclear Accident' is part of a policy package of the Abe administration, which aims to accelerate the reconstruction and revitalisation of the Tohoku region after the Fukushima disaster (Reconstruction Agency, 2014; Terasako, 2018). In 2019 still, the most recent campaign material tries to persuade its intended audience in the same simplistic way as before: Japan's food radiation standards are 'the strictest in the world' (Reconstruction Agency, 2018), while consumer avoidance is an immoral and selfish act towards the affected farmers and the reconstruction of the region.

In line with the official message of control and progress touted by PM Abe and his government as the country hosts both the Rugby World Cup (2019) and the Summer Olympics (2020), food-related risk communication increasingly stresses progress and introduces forward-looking initiatives, while glossing over remaining health

risks or inconvenient truths (Asahi Shimbun, 2019). While the focus on 'correct information' dissemination persists, the discourse has clearly moved away from the *fūhyō higai* narrative and irrational consumer concerns. At the same time, the material hints at a fatigue with the issue of radiation, and gives the impression Japan is ready to close off this chapter.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this presentation demonstrates how the governmental risk communication efforts, although aimed at managing the various food risks, actually contributed to and intensified public confusion and uncertainty, and as such eroded institutional trust in the domestic food governance system. Despite this rocky start in the initial reaction to the disaster, the food safety authorities have acknowledged these failures in terms of risk communication and included efforts towards stakeholder participation over time. Nevertheless, despite its official subscription to a form of 'interactive' risk communication which does not use 'the persuasion strategy' (CAA, 2019), governmental campaigns are still symptomatic of old-school conceptualizations of risk communication and broader persisting issues within the Japanese food governance system.

The most recent intensified communication efforts, including much newly published and produced material, hint at a wish to close of the Fukushima chapter, maybe just in time for the Summer Olympics 2020. Unfortunately, recent developments at the plant might jeopardize these strategic efforts and the public diplomacy efforts pushing the idea that the disaster is 'under control' might have the opposite effects (Asahi Shimbun, 2019).

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